

CURSE OF THE GIANT MUFFINS
AND OTHER WASHINGTON MALADIES

Michael Kinsley/Summit Books/\$17.95

R. Emmett Tyrrell, Jr.

In this inaugural collection of Michael Kinsley's writings the concerned reader finally has a chance to take the measure of the *New Republic's* sometimes awkward, sometimes agile editor undistracted by the controversies, surprising in number, that have entailed his brief career. News stories have echoed with his complaints about his salary and insufficient vacation time. Employers have questioned his ethics: a junket to Lebanon, his choice of manuscripts for publication, his taste. There was the time when *Harper's* under his editorship called Clare Boothe Luce a "courtesan" in a headline. Later the magazine insulted Susan Sontag, the writer, associating her with rock groupies. He ducked the first controversy by pleading ignorance of courtesan's unsavory meaning. How he got out of the second I do not recall; possibly he said "she looked good to me."

Kinsley is given to put-downs. It is a dispensation allowed him in the grim American media because he presents himself as a moralist, and that he is but in strictly contemporary terms. He is absorbed with the minor peccancies of the moment. Nowhere in this book does he demonstrate an acute awareness of our time's great evils: the totalitarian shade now pulled over Southeast Asia, the decline of much of the Third World into barbarism, terrorism's manifold cruelties and dangers, the enduring horror of Communism again elucidated but with unusual vividness by Armando Valladares. Kinsley does not even demonstrate much awareness of the squalor of our slums.

Nonetheless he is celebrated, and the adjective applied to him with curious inveterateness is "smart"—not intelligent, not thoughtful, just "smart." If I were Kinsley that would make me a little uneasy. His work is strangely devoid of many of the marks of a civilized mind. It is just possible that Kinsley is beginning to be recognized as a primitive. This should not be too surprising. As he himself indicates in

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one of this book's few affectionate essays, he once worked for Ralph Nader. From these pages he now emerges as the Republic's most sedulous interpreter of the master's work, hence his stunted sensibility and narrowness. The planet Earth might be imperiled by pestilence and flames, and Michael Kinsley would want to make just one more point about Felix Rohatyn's tax write-offs.

Yet I shall fain defend Kinsley against those who say that he is neither liberal nor conservative, or that he has no higher political principle than jealousy. True, he has little reverence for liberal pieties. And true, he serves up fearsome drubbings to conservatives, discoursing frequently on the sordidness of their black hearts. Still, this does not mean Kinsley is some sort of jolly nihilist. Close textual analysis of this slim volume reveals that he does adhere to one very important political principle.

Kinsley believes that it is his moral duty to disturb his neighbor. That, of course, is the surviving principle of modern liberalism. Liberalism has gone off in many contradictory directions. It has moved from prizing a color-blind society to prizing a color-obsessed society. It has exchanged the welfare state for the redistributive hoosegow. Animal rights is rising on the agenda. But one age-old liberal principle endures the erosions of time, and Kinsley adheres to it lovingly. Today's liberals still believe in disturbing the peace. Modern liberalism is the only political philosophy ever based on a simple misdemeanor. That Kinsley practices his misdemeanors against liberals and conservatives alike does not make him a nihilist but rather a liberal of the finest metal. He is Eleanor Roosevelt for the 1980s. Perhaps some day he will marry a President.

Kinsley afflicts liberals differently from the way that he afflicts conservatives. At liberals he merely snickers, leaving them hurt and bemused as to the substance of his complaints. There is none, and he offers none. Consider when he snickers at the Democrats' devotion to Social Security and to

agricultural price supports. Aside from chiding these programs because they "benefit people at least as well off as those who are paying for them," Kinsley goes no deeper. He simply ignores the liberal's rationale for them. He is no Friedmanite advocate of free markets. Friedman wants to raise incomes. Kinsley just wants to begrudge them. He knows it disturbs people. Elsewhere in this volume he will discomfit the peace movement by snickering at its melodrama and urgency. Conscientious readers might recall that in a preceding section on conservatives he blamed them for "helping to spread war fever" in the 1980s. So why is he snickering at the peace movement's worries? Because he is a nuisance. It is a matter of principle.

Kinsley takes more care in afflicting conservatives. That is not to say that he bothers to refute them. But he does much more than merely snicker. He misrepresents them. He ignores their most telling arguments. He offers false analogies. He tortures logic. He, unless he is a stupid man, lies. For instance, it is untrue to write that "some conservatives speak almost wistfully of the advantages enjoyed by ruthless totalitarians . . . and medieval religious zealots . . ." or that the Reagan Administration's "greatest moral outrage is reserved for people who acquire some advantage because they are black." Has Kinsley forgotten the Administration's moral denunciations of Communism? He must realize that "greed" is not admired by supply-siders, that neoconservatives do not "see socialism everywhere," and that those stoneheads who speak of "moral equivalence" between Washington and Moscow are not speaking of the equivalence of the two powers' strategic forces as Kinsley claims. They are declaring both regimes morally equivalent, and conservatives are right to complain.

Kinsley's literary style has admirers and critics. Were he alive I think Macaulay would be numbered among the critics, at least based on his 1830 appraisal of Robert Southey: "In the mind of Mr. Southey reason has no place at all. . . . He does not seem to know what an argument is. He never troubles himself to answer the arguments of his opponents. . . . It has never occurred to him that there is a difference between assertion and demonstration . . . that two contradictory propositions cannot be undeniable truths, that to beg the question is not the way to settle it . . ." George Orwell, too, would be out of sympathy with the Kinsley style, and Orwell's 1940 essay suggests where Kinsley might side were he in London when funny old Adolf

was menacing the bourgeoisie and Orwell noted the prewar British intelligentsia's "general negativism, querulous attitude, their complete lack at all times of any constructive suggestion," and finally their "emotional shallowness." Yet neither Macaulay nor Orwell lived in an era when a political philosophy justified being a nuisance. Perhaps they would go easy on him.

Moreover, Kinsley can be funny, especially on things that are not all that serious, such as fads, poseurs in politics and business (Mary Cunningham!). If only he could deliver an elbow to the ribs of some figures from history, say Schweitzer, or a literary eminence, say Proust, or Nietzsche or Marx or Beethoven, with all his annoying grievances. But the modern moralist restricts himself to a very narrow range: thy neighbor's tax returns, thy neighbor's police radar detector, his uses of frequent flier coupons. These have actually been past props for this genius's satire.

I have now been in the company of Michael Kinsley for over two hundred pages, and let me tell you he puts me in mind of a mean little lawyer down in an alcove of the Bureau of Labor Statistics. Are there no limits to his absorption with human baseness? The world has always harbored self-promoters. In fact Kinsley is a self-promoter as is obvious from his public rows. Furthermore he is an embarrassingly insecure self-promoter as is recognizable in his habit of repeatedly introducing persons in this book as "my friend _____." Nowadays such petty fellows are called neoliberals, that is to say a liberal who makes his way in the world disarming conservatives by appropriating their arguments against liberals. Then he disarms liberals by reviling his intellectual benefactors on the right. As Kinsley shows in this volume, such liberals can occasionally have great fun, but that is because they have no honor. □



LOOKING FORWARD

George Bush with Victor Gold/Doubleday/\$18.95

Victor Gold (without George Bush)

The Presidential Candidate's Book first surfaced as a political art form when Nathaniel Hawthorne published his monumental biography of James Buchanan, circa 1856. Quite possibly you've forgotten the work. Perfectly understandable. Whether books of this kind are remembered or forgotten depends on the future success of their subjects. Who, for example (save its relentless author), now recalls Harold Stassen's *Where I Stand*, a Presidential Candidate's Book aimed at limning Stassen's vision of America, circa 1948?

True, in Buchanan's case, the man did win the election. Other than that,

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however, he has come down through the years as one of the worst losers ever to occupy the Oval Office, a President not having the good public relations sense either to embroil the country in a war or get himself shot. So much for Nathaniel Hawthorne's vision of post-Mohican America.

On the other hand, John F. Kennedy's *Profiles in Courage*, in which the author defined his vision in terms of the political heroism of others, did well by both Kennedy's campaign and his place in history. Even today *Profiles* is regularly checked out of libraries by high school civics students and aspiring presidential candidates in search of a winning literary format of their own.

In *Looking Forward*, described by its publisher as the first autobiography ever written by a sitting Vice President, George Bush has chosen as his format not a broad-gauge history, like Kennedy's, or a visionary book of "new ideas," like Stassen's or Gary Hart's, but an updated version of the Hawthorne approach, i.e., Bush's story comes first-person, in the manner of recent sagas by such disparate entrepreneurs as Lee Iacocca, Chuck Yeager, and Ed Koch, all of whom turned out their life stories *with or as-told-to* a collaborator, i.e., flack.

The process works this way: the autobiographer, in a series of tape-recorded sessions, fills in the dramatic details of his life. The tapes are then transcribed, edited, and sent back to the subject for revision. A tone is established—informal and anecdotal, as if the subject were seated in the reader's family room, sipping a Coors and shmoozing about the good old days ("I'll never forget the time . . ."). As readers of *Iacocca*, *Yeager*, and *Mayor* know, a generous dollop of score-settling and now-it-can-be-told bitchiness is also part of the sales package, e.g., Iacocca on Henry Ford II, Yeager on the Air Force brass, Koch on Mario Cuomo, Jimmy Carter, the United Nations, and assorted other "wackos."

From the outset, however, *Looking Forward*—the title derives from a Teddy Roosevelt maxim—comes up short on the gossip-mongering front.

Bush was U.S. envoy to China, for example, when then-House Speaker Carl Albert came to town and drank himself under Mao's Great Hall table. A marvelous story, as told by others who witnessed the scene, but despite the strong remonstrances of his collaborator, Bush didn't include a hint of it in his book. Instead, those interested in Albert's drinking habit will have to rely on the raconteurship of his good friend and Democratic colleague "Tip" O'Neill, who makes much of it in his autobiography, *Man of the House*.

Regrettably, there are other instances of Bush's wimpish failure to catch the autobiographical spirit of the times. It would be interesting to read Bush's version of conversations held between him and O'Neill—as well as President Reagan and O'Neill—to find out whether, as O'Neill would have us believe, he invariably left them at a loss for words; or to learn what was said at Cabinet meetings when George Shultz took on Cap Weinberger, Weinberger took on David Stockman, and Stockman took on the world.

But that, as Bush stuffily informs us early on, isn't what he had in mind when he undertook to write his autobiography. Giving "fair notice" in his author's preface, he cautions that if any reader expects to discover "untold secrets" about the Reagan Administration, complete with the inside story on closed-door meetings and Cabinet disputes, "you'll be disappointed."

Indeed. That being the case, one might wonder why a sitting, standing, or running Vice President—for that matter, any Washington luminary—would even bother to dictate his memoirs into a tape recorder. But Bush apparently has his own autobiographical agenda, aimed at readers interested in the more achromatic aspects of American political life, e.g., the way the Vice Presidency operates, how the media affect our presidential selection process, the degree to which bullshit phrases like "vision of the future" and "new ideas" pollute the political dialogue. (Bush doesn't think much of either, nor of the liberals' claims that they alone are "compassionate" and "responsive" to social issues.)

Not that the Vice President shows complete disdain for the modern reader's taste for the personal. In early chapters he tells a great deal about himself, material that runs counter to certain widely held perceptions.

Bush is not, for example, the product

"Look up and not down; look out and not in; look forward and not back; and lend a hand." A Bull Moose party slogan in 1912, the line was taken from a sermon delivered by U.S. Senate Chaplain Edward Everett Hale.

of a New England Brahmin family, as is generally reported in media profiles. His father, Prescott Bush, came out of Columbus, Ohio; his mother, Dorothy Walker, was a native of St. Louis. The family moved from the Middle West to the South (Kingsport, Tennessee); to Milton, Massachusetts, where George, the second of five children, was born; then to Greenwich, Connecticut, where the future Vice President lived until, age 17, he joined up to become a naval aviator after the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor.

Bush also recounts (for the first time in his own words) the story of his being shot down in a bombing raid on the Japanese-held island of Chi-chi Jima, a wartime incident that earned him the Distinguished Flying Cross. He tells of his postwar years at Yale and, in a more introspective vein, the desire he and his wife Barbara had to "break away" from their Eastern roots; which led him to Texas in 1948, into the oil business, and, after building his own off-shore company, into politics.

As Bush tells it, *Looking Forward* was originally intended as an autobiographical résumé of the ten years, 1967-77, that saw him arrive in Washington as a congressman; move on to New York City as U.S. ambassador to the United Nations; then back to Washington as chairman of the Republican National Committee; across the Pacific to China as American envoy to Peking; and again back to Washington as director of the Central Intelligence Agency. With the coming of Jimmy Carter's Snopes Administration, the Bushes headed back to Houston, George "taking notes and talking into my tape recorder" in the months that followed.

"Then, as often occurs in the life of a book, a funny thing happened on the way to the printer," he writes. "I was bitten by another bug and found myself spending long days and nights campaigning in Iowa, New Hampshire, and other presidential primary states. In July 1980, I became Ronald Reagan's running mate. . . . In January, 1981, I was sworn in as Vice President . . ."

Seven years later, the bug still bites, the only difference being that now George Bush is in a position to have both his book and his presidential campaign. Whether either is remembered in the years ahead depends, as always, on the future success of its subject: Oilman Bush, Congressman Bush, Ambassador Bush, Chairman Bush, Director Bush, Vice President Bush . . . *President Bush?* That remains, as a candidate once said to his collaborator-flack, to be seen. For those readers interested in conjecture along those lines, *Looking Forward* may be your dish of tea; or, as it were, bottle of Coors. □